

Crash course for accidental farmers

KATHERINE LINDH

When 85-year-old farmer Jack Keane suffered a traumatic farming accident in April 2010, it was up to his daughter Jo-Anne and son-in-law Grant Goodwin to pick up the pieces.

In re-establishing the farming business they have converted it from conventional farming to a more sustainable management system.

Jack was caught under a cultivator while trying to work up a fire-break on his home property, six kilometres out of Farrell Flat, in the Mid North. He spent months in intensive care in Adelaide before making the transition back to Clare, where he now lives in a local nursing home.

Grant and Jo-Anne have spent the period since the accident coming to terms with the farm operations and working to modernise the business to include sustainable farming practices for future family members.

Grant describes the past 20 months or so as a tough time for the family and the farming business, which was operated solely by Jack.

“We had to make a lot of decisions in April 2010,” he said. “Sowing was just around the corner, so the first decision was whether to continue farming or simply maintain everything until we knew what was going to happen with Jack.

“After some deliberation we decided we wanted to ‘have a go’. Initially we had a lot of help from our neighbours, who at times just turned up. Some even offered to put the crop in for us. Lamb marking just happened while we were travelling to and from Adelaide in those early weeks.”

Grant has previously worked as a cemetery maintenance worker, a wedding photographer and a bus driver. He also has a finance background and has worked on a part time basis as Finance Officer for SANTFA for the past 10 years.

With his farming experience limited to occasional part time help for Jack and involvement with SANTFA, Grant had to teach himself a lot of basic practices including how to sow a crop, drench a sheep and manage the day-to-day operation of a farming property.



GRANT GOODWIN AT HOME ON THE KEANE FARM WHERE HE AND HIS WIFE JO-ANNE HAVE TAKEN OVER FROM JO-ANNE'S FATHER, WHO SUFFERED A FARMING ACCIDENT 18 MONTHS AGO.

“I have always had the mentality to ‘give things a go’, so I just went about teaching myself. I also spoke to neighbours when in doubt and read a lot of information where I could.

“There had been little or no communication or knowledge from Jack about how things were run, so we faced the challenge of trying to pick up where he left off. As part of that process I started to develop a plan of my own, which has included new ways of looking at land management and how we farm.

“The other issue was the current machinery on the farm, which was run-down, slow, or broken. We have kept most of it, but I try to ensure things are maintained and all machinery is cleaned after it’s used.”

The Keanes’ farm is approximately 485 ha but only 365 ha are arable. Until Grant and Jo-Anne took over, the farm was divided into 120 to 140 ha for cropping and 340 to 360 ha for sheep.

“So far I haven’t changed the farming focus much,” Grant said. “We are still a mixed farming operation. I think it still makes sense to have diversification over sheep and cropping to minimise risk and have exposure over different markets. At

this point I am still learning how to farm but would like to see much greater efficiency of production and greater return from the land asset.

“In the past the sheep have been run with a focus on wool production. We are in the process of reducing wether numbers, which were about half the flock, and increasing the number of ewes, with the aim of developing a self-replacing Merino flock that will still give us wool production through the ewes but also give us lambs to sell.

“In the year Jack had his accident we sowed approximately 40 ha to Frame wheat and a little oats for feed. This year, based on the recommendation of our local agronomist, we sowed 120 ha of Frame.”

Grant would like to increase the area sown to crop in the future to increase the profitability of the business and spread risk.

“We are looking to double the area currently put to crop. With the introduction of no-till we should be able to achieve this easily in the same time it took to sow the smaller area using conventional tillage,” he said. “We will consult with an agronomist to work out

crop rotations and to help monitor the changes that we're implementing to ensure they are economically and environmentally viable and sustainable. We have looked at the paddocks that have been under pasture and what wheat varieties could better handle root disease.

"I would also like to improve stubble retention and make better use of the ground. Jack did a lot of stubble burning but we are looking to eliminate burning and retain all our stubbles."

While some may find economy of scale an issue on such a small property, Grant believes there are ways around the issue.

"We think that instead of looking at the property as a small farm, we will turn it around and look at it as a more manageable business.

"We are hoping to make the small size of the property work in our favour. We don't have to spend a fortune on new machinery to cover a large area, and harvest and sowing are not as drawn out as they often are on larger properties.

"We don't need to have large air-seeding equipment that requires a lot of horsepower, and as long as we are able to sow within the optimum sowing period we don't need to get all our crop into the ground within two weeks.

"We want to make sure we don't overcapitalise. I won't be reaping my own crop this year. Our old MF587 pto header will remain in the shed because last year we felt we were spending more time fixing the machine than running it," he said.

KEANE FARM SNAPSHOT

PERSONNEL: Grant Goodwin, wife Jo-Anne (nee Keane) and three children, Jack, Chloe and Alex.

HISTORY: property has been owned and operated by the Keane family since the mid 1940s.

PROPERTY: 485 ha at Farrell Flat, in the Mid North of South Australia.

ENTERPRISES:

Previously - approximately 1,000 adult Merino sheep (half wethers) and 120 ha of wheat and barley.

2011-12 – 1,000 adult merino sheep (70% ewes) and 120 ha of wheat.

2012-13 – reduce sheep flock to 600 Merino ewes, double area of crop to 240 ha (half Scout wheat and half Commander barley) and establish some oats/vetch pasture

NEGATIVES: A lot of work to clean up fences, sell off wethers, repair and maintain old machinery and change farming practices to no-till stubble retention.

POSITIVES: Herbicides very effective because very few chemicals used on the property previously. More than half the land is arable. The business is in a manageable financial position.

Over the past 18 months or so Grant has upgraded some of the farm machinery and invested in new technology to improve practices at the farm.

"Last year I purchased a modified John Shearer 24- row Culti Drill with Agmaster points to replace the old Massey Ferguson combine. It's still a combine but it will enable me to go straight in and direct drill. It also has six more rows than the old machine, with far better trash flow, greater seed and fertiliser capacity, was relatively cheap to purchase and doesn't require an immediate tractor

upgrade, which is just another cost.

"However, I would like a bit more horsepower on the tractor to enable me to start to sow earlier and at a quicker pace. I'm looking for an older machine in the second-hand market but may have to hold on until next harvest.

"I have just negotiated purchase of a second-hand Hardi spray unit that will enable me to apply chemical accurately and uniformly and is a lot safer, in terms of chemical handling, than our old Nufarm unit, and has a larger tank and wider boom.



GRANT GOODWIN IN FRAME WHEAT ON THE KEANE FAMILY FARM.

“On our farm a foam marker is considered precision technology and is a serious upgrade from eyeball on wheel tracks!”

Grant has been helped by neighbours and drawn on information from SANTFA and publications in his efforts to learn farming skills in such a short period of time.

“My neighbours were a huge help to me and were very supportive during the accident as well. I also read a lot of information, including publications such as *GroundCover* from GRDC, the *Stock Journal* and Kondinin Group publications.

“The internet has also been a great source of information, particularly with weather watching. In the past Jack would have

listened to a weather forecast on the radio but the internet provides timely information on weather and grain marketing and is a source of helpful tips on farming methods.

“However, a lot of what I have learnt so far has also been through trial and error or by osmosis, by which I mean filtering information from people in the field,” he said.

Grant said SANTFA had given him access to a lot of practical information, especially through the conferences and workshops offered to members.

“SANTFA has been a source of ideas - alternatives to the only way of farming that I’d seen - and of practical information I have obtained through past

journals, conference proceedings and a couple of publications. I have also had the opportunity through SANTFA to rub shoulders with other farmers in SA, across Australia and world-wide,” he said.

The future for Grant and Jo-Anne depends on the succession plan for their three children, Jack, Chloe and Alex.

“I’ve had to restrain myself from two opposing urges; heading out to buy new machinery and selling off the sheep and leasing the farm to someone else,” Grant said. “It would be easier to lease the farm, to walk away and work elsewhere and not have to worry about all that is involved in farming. Financially, there is a lot less risk and potentially higher return with this option if you include the off-farm income.

“However, the farm has been in Jo-Anne’s family for three generations and we want to keep the land in the family.

“Our experience over the past two years highlights the importance of planning for the future. A succession plan and a life insurance plan are so important when you live and work on the land because you never know what might happen in the future.

“Good communication is essential, too. Sharing ideas and telling others what is going on and what the plan is for the farm is a healthy way to ensure everyone is moving in the same direction,” he said.

Grant’s current plan for the family farm is to work with what they have and upgrade and improve things with minimal risk.

“It would be great to invest in new machinery that won’t break down, is reliable and gets the job down quicker, but the capital outlay would be substantial,” he said.

“Jack was a great farmer and his knowledge was immense. He was a hard worker and always had the mentality that he would die with his boots on. An old dog mightn’t change his tricks but I feel there is so much more to learn and I am learning every day.

“Some ideas don’t work, and I have to question why and identify the positives and negatives from the experiences. I am always looking at how I can do things better. I want to leave my kids something that is sustainable and manageable, with a lasting future.”

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